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ON PAGE A-17

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On the Way to Victory

KANSAS CITY—President Reagan's deft touch in killing the age issue as the last visible impediment to beating Walter Mondale proved the efficacy of Secretary of State George Shultz's advice during last week's prepping session: "Follow your instinct, Mr. President."

While Reagan followed his instinct, Mondale attempted the improbable: to portray himself as a more knowledgeable and reliable nuclear commander in chief and a stronger leader than Ronald Reagan, a reversal of perceived roles that seemed highly unlikely to sway many voters at this late date.

Reagan's instinct was to turn the age issue on its head in a witty, unrehearsed disavowal of intent to use it in reverse against Mondale. Reagan pollster Richard Wirthlin's computerized focus group of representative voters shot back a stunningly favorable "trace," or reaction, that one Reagan campaign aide told us "went right off the charts."

That killed the last realistic prospect of a Mondale miracle on Nov. 6 and showed that non-politician Shultz, at least, understood that Reagan's instinct has infinitely more value than all those statistics stuffed into his head for the disastrous Oct. 7 debate.

It also exposed the deadly flaw in the latter stages of the Mondale campaign: tie Reagan's alleged recklessness on the nuclear war issue to ignorance and senility. That is a switch from earlier efforts that sought to endow Reagan with

the dangerous warmongering proclivities of Attila the Hun. The charge of playing fast and loose with nuclear war remains; its rationale has switched to competence, a quality that Mondale claimed as his alone in his effort to supersede Reagan as the tough-minded commander in chief.

Mondale's intent to keep the pressure on this issue was dramatized at his post-debate rally in the Muehlebach Hotel. He ridiculed Reagan, accusing him of being stupid enough to believe that naval commanders could press the recall button for a submarine-launched, nuclear-tipped missile and that "it would back up."

Minutes later, Barry Carter, one of Mondale's principal debate briefers, carried the theme further. With a straight face, he told reporters that he was genuinely "frightened" by Reagan's alleged ignorance of weapons and warfare. Although that theme would now seem obsolete in view of Reagan's disposal of the age or senility issue, just as Reagan earlier disposed of the warmonger issue, Mondale has fashioned his campaign in a way that leaves him little else.

The early promise glimpsed by some Democratic politicians in the unprecedented tax-increase proposal Mondale unveiled in his acceptance speech proved too illusory. Such a burden has it become that Fritz Mondale seldom mentions his tax package anymore. Most Democratic congressional candidates have begged him to drop it.

His electrifying choice of Rep. Gerald

dine Ferraro has also failed to meet earlier expectations. Reagan praised running mate George Bush Sunday night; Mondale ignored Ferraro, a curious omission if he feels she is shoring up the Mondale-Ferraro ticket.

That leaves the nuclear-leadership theme, the very same issue, now dressed in different clothes, that Jimmy Carter used with utter futility against Reagan in 1980. White House chief of staff James A. Baker III warned the president all last week that he would be facing "a mean Mondale" here. He was proved correct: Mondale ridiculed Reagan's leadership, charging presidential culpability on the terrorist bombings in Lebanon, on CIA malfeasance in Nicaragua and on nuclear holocaust as a likely product of using the atmosphere for missile defense. Propping up the charges was alleged presidential ignorance and, behind that, the specter of senility.

The White House alarm system had been turned on. Reagan used his regular Saturday radio broadcast for a preliminary rebuttal, quoting Mondale as having said after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979: "It just baffles me why the Soviets these last few years have behaved as they have. And why do they have to build up all those arms?"

But the *coup de grâce* came here when the president followed his instinct and slew the dragon of age. When that happened, Mondale's last chance seemed to disappear.

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